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# BOOK REVIEW

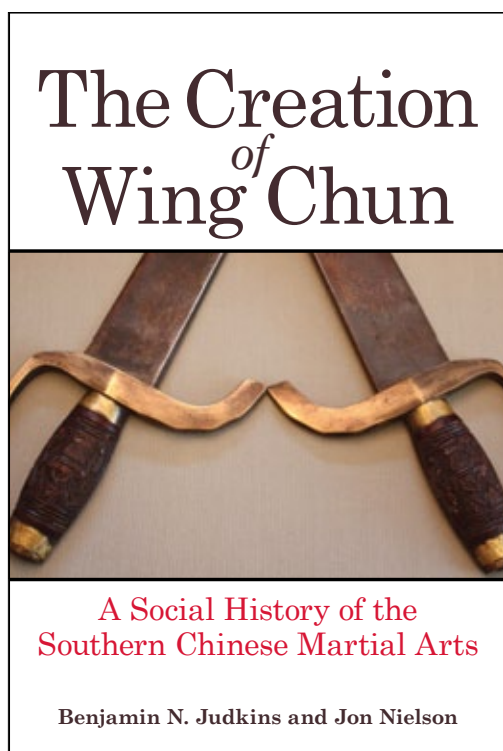
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## The Creation of Wing Chun: A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts

Benjamin N. Judkins and Jon Nielson

State University of New York Press, 2015

364 pages      \$90 /£59.29



Written under imperial sponsorship, traditional Chinese historiography was propagandistic and didactic: the relationship between knowledge and power was not ambiguous, and historians sought to establish dynastic legitimacy and judge the past as a 'mirror' for posterity, as in the saying: 'The overturned cart ahead of us should serve as a warning'. Benjamin Judkins and Jon Nielson, too, are concerned with the question of legitimacy, but in this case, it is the legitimacy of martial arts studies. Martial arts was scorned by traditional Chinese literati, ignored by Western historians, and predicted to go extinct by Western and Chinese modernizers. However, as this book brilliantly demonstrates, late imperial and twentieth century Chinese history cannot be properly understood without it. So if it is true that the world needs a book like this, it is equally true that the author needed to write it. Books happen because of perceived gaps or falsehoods in the historical record: sins of omission and sins of commission. Most exercises in historical deconstruction, however, target hostile ideologies – sexism, racism, homophobia – but Judkins' deconstruction of wing chun is an act of love, as he simultaneously deconstructs myth and reconstructs history. To a hammer, everything looks like a nail, and to a historian everything looks like a product of the past. However, going beyond the 'great man' theory of history, the social scientist in him weaves a tight fabric of the cultural, economic, political and social strands that go into the creation of wing chun.

As a student of the martial arts in both the practical and academic sense, it appears that Judkins and Nielson have turned a personal obsession into a professional specialization, doing for martial arts what women have done for women's studies, Blacks for African-American studies, or gays for queer studies. Martial arts scholars have been given permission by social scientists and arts critics to take popular culture seriously and emboldened by anthropologists and cultural theorists to come out of the closet as observer-participants and revel in embodied knowledge. Since martial arts schools often become a home-away-from-home and intentional family, we might see this as a work of genealogy – the adopted child seeking its biological parents. Thus, we can say that the writer is in the mold of participant-observer, not, however, in the anthropological sense of immersing himself in the lives of his informants, but rather relying on the written and visual record. He approaches his task loaded for bear, with the ultimate collection of primary and secondary sources and an unprecedented set of scholarly skills in both research methods and theory.

So now that you know this book is a labor of love, the next question becomes what is it about? Judkins and Nielson are equal parts sleuth and storyteller: the sleuth collects evidence and separates fact from fiction, and the storyteller assembles the facts in a cogent and compelling account of what really happened. Starting with the assumption that all human creations are culturally constructed, they say 'Wing Chun is a "social

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## REVIEWER

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construction” just as much as it is a compilation of forms and techniques’, adding that he sees it in the context of ‘globalization, economic development, and identity construction’. This may be but the latest stage in the demystification process that started with the May Fourth New Culture Movement, peaked with Mao’s Cultural Revolution, and now in the hands of skeptical Western scholars, is subjected to postmodern, postcolonial, and poststructuralist analysis. For early Chinese scholars, historicizing the martial arts was a struggle for the soul of China and for its survival in the modern world, a way of preserving Chinese ‘essence’ while strengthening the nation. May Fourth reformers saw myth and superstition through the binary of feudal and modern, Marxists saw it as ruling class and proletariat, and postmodern historians see myth as a kind of ideology, or ‘knowledge’, that reinforces power.

Judkins and Nielson attack myth on a least three levels. First, they explode myths of creation, then the notion that styles are fixed and stable entities, and finally the idea that there is a ‘unified field’, or meta-narrative of Chinese martial arts that has always existed and is teleologically destined to evolve into the current state-sponsored, standardized forms. Judkins and Nielson view myth with a combination of clinical detachment and fascination. Their discovery of identical creation stories in many martial arts is more proof of plagiarism than confirmation of Jungian ‘collective unconscious’. Perhaps, too, their sympathies allow them to ‘explode’ myth gently and with a Jamesian recognition of its pragmatic psychological value. In the authors’ hands, then, myth making becomes a part of history.

Now that Judkins and Nielson have historicized the origins of wing chun, does that mean that imagination plays no role in martial arts? Has science eliminated religion; have documentaries eliminated Hollywood? Martial arts and myth are inextricably entwined in the psyche of the practitioner – warrior dreams and the hero archetype will survive. Judkins and Nielson are passionate about the power of the social sciences to unpack what really happened, and they deliver the most holographic account of the rise of any martial art to date. In the process he clinches the argument that fact really is more fascinating than fiction. The world is not more boring because of Copernicus and Darwin.

Actually, deconstructing the myth of wing chun’s creation is child’s play: the burning of the Southern Shaolin Temple did not happen, and the characters in the story did not exist. Media, of course, is the new mythopoetic machine, and he acknowledges the role of Bruce Lee and Ip Man films in burnishing the wing chun brand for today. If the myth of misty mountains, monks and nuns must go, so too the apocrypha of righteous rebels and Red Boat opera singers. What’s left are real world influences, such as Choy Li Fut for its popularization and institutionalization of a southern martial art, the Jingwu Association and Guoshu Academies for adopting Western scientific terminology and promotional paradigms, and craft guilds for providing the model of organizational structure. Tracing the chameleon we know as wing chun, he shows how it adapted to different environments: Foshan, Hong Kong, and the global marketplace; different eras: empire, Republic, People’s Republic, and colony; and different classes: gentry, bourgeoisie, working class, doctors, militia, bodyguards, police, delinquents, gangsters, and ultimately non-Chinese.

The book’s language and underlying logic derive from contradictions inherent in twentieth-century China: traditional and modern, central and local, northern and southern, private and public, urban and rural, revolutionary and conservative, Chinese and foreign, working class and literati, Communist and Nationalist. The author uses traditional structuring devices, chronology and geography, as reflected in the book’s two parts, ‘Hand Combat, Identity, and Civil Society in Guangdong, 1800-1949’ and ‘Conflict, Imperialism, and Modernization: The Evolution of Wing Chun Kung Fu, 1900-1972’. These are the Genesis and Exodus of wing chun.

To whom will this book appeal? Martial arts scholarship always aspires to satisfy two readerships: scholars and practitioners. Among practitioners, there are monostylists and polystylists; among scholars, there are martial

arts studies specialists, social scientists and historians. Fellow scholars are soft targets. The subject matter may be unfamiliar, but the scholarly methods will be instantly recognizable and highly impressive; practitioners are another matter. Certainly they will be disappointed if they were expecting a how-to book, but will they appreciate learning the 'truth' about the background of their art? All of this deconstruction, demythologizing, and destabilizing may be unsettling to the neophyte practitioner, for whom wing chun is that thing s/he associates with one teacher, one class, one set of routines, and one version of origins. If we use the analogy of a chess game, the Sinologist will know the board, the pieces, and the rules of the game. For the lay practitioner, everything that the Sinologist takes for granted will be new, making for a very steep learning curve. Having said this, however, Judkins accomplishes his scholarly tasks in an engaging and accessible style, without a hint of what Chomsky calls the 'polysyllabic truisms', 'gibberish', and 'pretentious rhetoric' that plague so much of contemporary scholarship. Judkins' scholarly tools are razor sharp, but he has no axes to grind, and he shares his discoveries with an enthusiasm matched only by his erudition. He is not a 'preservationist' and does not romanticize or essentialize his Chinese subjects. The central question may come down to whether historians are more open-minded about learning history through martial arts, or whether martial artists are more open-minded about using history to gain insight into their art? In truth, scholars will see a masterful treatment of a colorful historical phenomenon, and unsuspecting practitioners will find themselves breathlessly swept up into the rarified atmosphere of social science theory.

What is the book's contribution? Paul Bowman's *Martial Arts Studies* laid to rest any doubts about the legitimacy of martial arts studies as a discipline, and Judkins and Nielson's *The Creation of Wing Chun* is the first major monograph to exploit that opening and resoundingly demonstrate that first-rate scholars need have no fear of putting their reputations at risk. Second, this work is the last nail in the coffin of formulaic accounts of martial arts lineages that splice a string of fictional and historical figures onto a mythic progenitor. In sum, wing chun students will see the most definitive exposition of the roots of their art, historians will see twentieth-century China through a new lens, and martial arts studies scholars will see a high water mark and model in their field.

Every good book attempts to answer some old questions and provoke some new ones. Social construction approaches to history always beg the question of cultural comparison. Judkins has skillfully unpacked the role of the mythic imagination in the construction of wing chun through fiction, folklore, and film. Asian myths of origin have often enjoyed a second life in their adopted Western homes, but they play differently to different audiences: to Chinese they speak to national essence; to Westerners they evoke exoticism. This is what the Chinese call, 'same bed; different dreams'. The themes of national salvation and regional identity may not be relevant to Western audiences, but somatic spirituality and self-defense survival skills have had universal appeal. As for identity formation, and particularly the role of martial arts in the construction of masculinity, these are features shared by both Chinese and Western practitioners of wing chun and other martial arts; however, wing chun's role in the construction of Cantonese identity cannot be nationalized, let alone globalized. Or can it? Can Marcel Mauss' 'techniques of the body', a theory developed from his observation that French youth had adopted a manner of walking from watching American films, help us explain the acquisition of foreign body language? Is wing chun then a kind of embodied *chinoiserie*? The multivalence of the martial arts as they evolved in China – preservationist and progressive, fundamentalist and reformist – ultimately allowed them to shape shift in adapting to the global environment. Another question is the assumption that in the process of globalization, it is the body mechanics that remain stable, while the mythology and social meaning are more malleable. Can we also assume variability in the mind's eye of the practitioner as they conjure different culturally specific adversaries during training? Did past Chinese practitioners conjure bandits, clan rivals, and colonialists, while their contemporary Western counterparts imagine schoolyard bullies, barroom brawlers, muggers, and rapists? Have Asian martial arts become so naturalized, like tea or ballet, that we forget their foreign origins? Are non-Asians participating in Asian martial arts perceived by Asians as global consumers or perpetrators of yellowface? These are all questions that Judkins and Nielson's provocative work raises and which clearly warrant further study.

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